

Do We Understand the Price of Serving God?

Dear Friends,

So much of our modern culture grows out of the fertile, but carnal soil of "What's in it for me?" People seldom witness an example in this culture of a truly selfless person whose life exudes devotion, true from-the-heart service to others. Is it any wonder, then, that you seldom, if ever, hear sermons from modern pulpits on such passages as our study lesson for this week?

Over the last four months of the pandemic social restrictions, I have observed many diverse reactions from sincere believing Christian people to the dreadful situation. "It is the latest conspiracy to shut down churches in this country." Would some people in power be happy to shut down our churches? Of course, but this is old news. We've known it for a very long time. Did the governmental agencies single out churches in their social restrictions, or did they apply their rules more widely? I learned long ago to distrust the wild and often scantily documented claims of conspiracies. Find one practicing doctor who breaks from his training and the dominant conclusion of medical research, and the conspiracist will hang his hat on that single man's testimony. My long-term conclusion regarding conspiracies, real or imagined, is affirmed in Psalm 2. In this case, inspired Scripture exposes the greatest real conspiracy of all time, almost a thousand years before it unfolded. And what did God do about it? He laughed! I rest in the abiding conviction that God's laughter at any conspiracy of broken humans is far more effective than my loud angry protests.

Other folks, similar to the conspiracists, discount the restrictions as foolish and unnecessary. If we listened to their words, they mysteriously and quite quickly learned more about infectious diseases than the whole world of medicine. Not to worry, when I need medical care for my next illness, I will contact my regular physician, trained and licensed, not them, unless they show proof that they attended and graduated medical school, and are duly licensed in a practice specializing in such diseases. I make no such claims to expertise which I cannot affirm with my life history. I write my convictions from one simple and single perspective. I write as a believing pastor who cares for people, people who agree with me and people whose blood pressure may spike from disagreement as they read my words here. I care and long to urge them, and myself, to learn more about our Biblical examples, and to practice them, especially when faced with trying seasons in our lives.

Why is this important? It sadly demonstrates that very sincere and devoted believers can so very easily go off the rails of Biblical faith into fruitless paths. But each such venture comes at the price of neglect to the one path that God has directed, that is edifying and safe for believers.

Am I afraid of the virus? I fear its potential effects, both for myself and for the people I love. The actual difference between dealing with life situations in faith and tempting the Lord is quite significant. Aside from the potential effect on me, I cannot rationalize a careless behavior that might put a fellow-believer at significant risk of exposure to this virus, an exposure that is potentially deadly. Pastors, think. How would you feel preaching the funeral of a church member whose death occurred because of your careless advice or example? There is nothing noble or Biblical about this path.

The path which Paul describes as effective for finishing his course with joy was not about Paul doing what Paul wanted. It was about serving the Lord's people with selfless joy. Yes, in this case, Paul knowingly went to Jerusalem in the face of obvious danger. Why? He went because he was wholly convinced by the Lord that was his right course for his service to those in need at Jerusalem. On other occasions, when faced with similar hostility because of his preaching, Paul exited the place, and preached elsewhere, so this lesson gives no example for how we might choose to ignore the present danger.

As long and spiritually exhausting as this isolation has been, it shall end in time, and we shall be able to

gather in safe, edifying fellowship. Our God is greater and stronger than an invisible virus, and He is also greater and stronger than any devious politician who dislikes Christians and their faith. Let's trust Him more through this ordeal. Spend more time on our knees, first for each other, and for a better day. And, above all, let's try to keep ourselves out of the way and watch for signs of the Lord's laughter at whatever devious men may or may not be doing. I'd rather watch my Lord laugh than watch angry men growl and politicians constantly point accusing fingers at other politicians.

Despite the temporary and painful interruption of our public gatherings, think of the blessings we have realized during these four months. One after another, many pastors, most of us not at all familiar with this thing called "Live streaming," followed the determined conviction of their calling and learned things they seldom if ever imagined before. As a result, our people can listen to more preaching in a week today than at almost any time in recent history. I pray that this sound, godly preaching will result in better informed and committed believers at church when the isolation finally ends. I hope for a better day then. Let's join together in prayer for the Lord to make this preaching fruitful for just such an outcome to the present trial. That activity follows our Biblical example far better than angry conspiracy outbursts or joining the politicians and blaming or accusing other believers who choose to deal with the isolation some way different from us.

If you are concerned about the issue, please speak with your personal physician who knows your health and your risk, should you contract this virus. Follow his/her counsel, and try to tune out and to ignore the political and well-meaning bullying from any other source. Time with the Lord and your Bible will prove far more fruitful and peaceful for you. In the end, it will also take you out the other side of this difficult time stronger in your faith. Isn't that more in line with Paul's goal of serving the Lord by serving His people?

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

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And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: Save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:22-24)

This is a soul-stirring, yet sobering passage. Among many others, it refutes the "Health and wealth" mindset of several modern professing Christian groups. Based on that belief system, Paul must have failed miserably in his personal faith to endure such dreadful resistance and trouble. No, the Holy Spirit continued His personal and intimate guidance of Paul on his course. Few modern teachings are as contradictory to Biblical Christian life as this particular teaching. Instead of serve-God-first-and-others-next, it builds its foundation on what you can gain for you. It falsely depicts the Christian life as one long smooth journey on "Easy Street," instead of the reality that Paul described here. The advocates of this system with whom I have talked make no secret of thinking the whole of the Christian life is about personal gain. Their stated objective is that gain. How does this self-first idea compare to Jesus' fundamental "Deny self and take up your cross" teaching of true discipleship? It contradicts Him and this teaching.

On occasion, pastors will read the narrative regarding Agabus' warning to Paul against going to Jerusalem (Beginning with Acts 21:10), and debate if Paul should have gone or not. I accept Paul's reasoning and conviction. I can read much about him and his motives in the New Testament. I read about Agabus only in that single passage.

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Especially to the pastors reading this piece, how would you react if you considered going to a particular place to preach, and the Holy Spirit, in whatever way He chose, communicated to you that this would be the reception you would face? I suspect many of us would reconsider and stay home.

In John 5, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath, telling the man to take up his bed and walk. Because this occurred on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted Jesus and would have killed Him if they had been able to do so. When Paul wrote that “...*bonds and afflictions abide me,*” he was writing about the same group of people who so fiercely opposed Jesus.

But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself. Not only did Paul **not** seek his piece of the “Health and wealth” pie, he consciously discounted his personal life and well-being. How is it that a moral man can find the strength and will-power to ignore self and devote himself so profoundly to a cause outside himself? He answers the question in these verses.

As I read Paul’s description of the reality of truly serving God in faith, and then consider the common modern mindset of professing believers, these folks convince me that J. Vernon McGee had it right. We live in an age of superficial “Preacher-ettes preaching sermon-ettes to Christian-ettes.” Take away personal gain from many of these folks, and they would abandon their faith in a heartbeat. I will not stereotype all of this group, but my personal experience with several members of that class in my business career convinced me that they understood very little of basic Christian ethics and practiced even less. They would insist on praying before a business lunch, but they would also say or do whatever they thought necessary to gain for themselves, however questionable the ethics, in their business dealings. I hope this personal experience was not representative of the group. In fairness to that group, I sadly confess to a few similar disappointments from men who claimed to be selfless believers in the grace of God. I can rest with the belief that my Lord knows the hearts of all men, so He knows how to judge and to deal with them all, with “Us all.”

Have you considered? Prior to his Damascus Road experience, Paul was a leading persecutor of Christians, including killing some, at least one, of them. He knew the mindset and the potential he faced in the hostility of the Jerusalem temple leadership toward Jesus, and him because of his faith. Despite knowing this danger, Paul refused to be moved. If the Lord directed him to go to Jerusalem to give those suffering saints some relief, he would gladly go and deal with the hostility. On other occasions, when Paul faced similar opposition in other cities, he would quietly, sometimes secretly, leave the city and go elsewhere to preach. (Acts 9:25; 2 Corinthians 11:33) We cannot doubt that Paul felt a strong conviction that the Lord had directed him to go to Jerusalem, or he might have gone elsewhere. That Paul valued something above his own life is obvious. What was that thing he so valued? What was his motive, the focus of our present study? The passage answers the question.

...so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God.

...so that I might finish my course with joy. Paul regarded his Christian testimony, the collective witness of his whole life, to be that important. He didn’t measure his Christian faithfulness based on a few days or months. He didn’t bear one testimony today and a contradictory testimony a month or a year later. He didn’t measure his faith based on time spent with godly people and exclude other times and seasons of his life when those folks were not around. He knew what he believed, and he didn’t allow persuasive old Pharisee friends or intellectual Greek philosophers to move him from one belief to another. Most of us have met the believer who seems to shift with every breeze that blows through his life. One day he believes “A.” The next time you see him he may well try to persuade you that “Z” is gospel truth. If you were looking for someone to testify in a court trial regarding the facts of a situation related to the trial, you would not want this fellow—or lady—to be your witness. Their changing,

unstable testimony makes them an unreliable witness. Instead of following Paul's example and finishing their one set course with joy, these people keep changing the address where they want to go with their life. You simply never know about them from one day to the next. Seldom do these people manifest joy in their discipleship. Understandably, they more often exude confusion.

How goes it with your "Course"? Today, after some four months of social "Distance" or near full isolation, how does your testimony compare with your testimony a year ago? If the people who know you best were asked to give a one-word description of your Christian life, would that one word be "Faithful"? "Steadfast"? "Reliable"? Or would their response vary, depending on when they were asked to give their report of your faith?

...so that I might finish my course with joy. Paul longed and worked to complete his divine assignment with joy, not with resentment or bitterness. The best way to complete an assignment with joy and contentment is to work hard to do the job right. In this case, a "Servant" to the church needs to "Serve," no mystery here, and to "Serve" well. Over my life in ministry, I have observed a few men in both church offices who became sadder and occasionally even bitter the longer they served. In these cases, something was wrong with their attitude toward their work. Perhaps they grew to think of their office as privilege instead of service, and, if the people didn't bow to their every demand, they were disappointed. Can you imagine a pastor trying to preach the gospel from a bitter, disappointed, and disillusioned heart? No, I can't either! He may go through the motions, but he cannot possibly truly preach the "Good news" of the gospel from such a disposition.

...and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus. "Ministry" in this setting means service. The "Minister's" function is to serve. How many preachers or pastors do you know who strive to serve the people in their church vs. those who expect to be treated special, to be served? Many years ago, I was researching the history and meaning of the Greek word translated "Ministry" here, also translated "Deacon" in other passages. Every resource emphasized service as the primary meaning of the word. One source discussed the early use of the word in first century (Or earlier) Greek culture. It apparently originated in an agricultural setting. That source defined the word as "To work so hard in the field that you stir up dust, and you keep working through the dust." Yes! Friends, that is the meaning of ministry in the New Testament, so that is the New Testament definition of both a pastor's and a deacon's role. It is not about claiming higher privilege or influence. It is about working in service to the needs and spiritual well-being of the church and its members.

Notice that Paul did not choose or claim this position, this "Ministry." He received it of the Lord. Men in either office in the church cannot claim or commandeer the position. They fill a role under the Lord, and it is a role of service, not of lordship.

Paul's primary divine assignment in his "Ministry" was to bear witness to "*...the gospel of the grace of God.*" He was not directed to devote his pulpit time to telling the people all about his personal accomplishments and successes. I've known a few, very few, thank the Lord, ministers who devoted much of their pulpit time to telling about their personal exploits in their ministry. Eventually, every one of these men imploded and lost their godly influence in their ministry. Paul understood the Lord's assignment to him, as it is to every pastor/preacher who follows the New Testament model. His testimony was to focus on "*...the gospel of the grace of God.*" The same charge applies to us.

If you know a pastor who has turned from joyful to bitter, urge him to study this lesson and strive to regain its model in his life. Serving God is, of all things, about serving God! And, likewise, about serving His people, not demanding that they serve us. Scripture often uses various fruit trees to describe the ministry and the service of God. No fruit tree ever grew its fruit for its personal benefit. Do you observe an apple tree eating the apples it grows? If we live up to the "Fruit factor" of these lessons, we shall work to be fruitful, but never for our personal benefit or gain. We work to be fruitful for the

benefit of the people we serve. How is your service going today?

Elder Joe Holder